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Ballet pays tribute to choreographer

Freelance

Special to the Journal

ITHACA - The life and work of Ithaca choreographer and renaissance man Larry Brantley will be celebrated in a tribute dance performance 7:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 9 and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 10 at the State Theatre.

Professional dancers, former students, friends and fans from around the world are gathering to honor Brantley, whose many talents included the great gift for being a friend.

Brantley came to Ithaca in the early 1970s. Already a noted leather craftsman who was asked to judge others' work at prestigious crafts shows, Brantley's life changed after he attended a non-traditional ballet performance choreographed by Alice Reid, founder and co-director of the **Ithaca Ballet** Company. He had just decided he wanted to learn to dance.

"He came to me as a young adult with hair down his back and a long beard down his chest," Reid said. "Within five years he was our leading male dancer."

Brantley won scholarships to choreography conferences and awards for his dancing, going on to dance for three different companies. Returning to Ithaca in the early 1980s to take up his professional life here, he moved into Alice Reid's house and resumed helping and teaching at the **Ithaca Ballet**, becoming the group's general manager in 1989.

"He was like a son to me," Reid said.

Brantley died in February 2006 shortly after being diagnosed with esophageal cancer; like many artists, he did not have medical insurance and was ill for several months before he even saw a doctor.

"He knew music from medieval chants through rock 'n' roll and whatever they're doing now," Reid said. So it was natural for Brantley to interweave his passions to choreograph a modern baseball fantasy to the music of 18th century composer William Boyce - this became "Boyceball," one of Brantley's best-known works. Cindy Reid, Alice's daughter, who began her professional dance career with Brantley as her first partner, will be dancing in "Boyceball" this weekend.

Brantley's knowledge of art inspired "Brueghelscape," another work on the program, based on the paintings of 16th century Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel. Craig Eagleson, one of Brantley's closest friends and a lighting designer, recalls coming up with a color palette for lighting and costumes based on the artist's work.

"We used to take the shows up to Eisenhower College (in Seneca Falls)," Eagleson said. We took Route 89 up there in the fall and looked at the foliage in strong sunlight. He said, 'These are the colors I want to use.' It's still one of my favorite pieces of his. We did a lot of pieces together."

Eagleson also put together a power-point presentation with cameos of Brantley's life, which will be screened during the performance.

In talking about Brantley, his sense of humor is always mentioned, often in conjunction with his spoof of the "bunhead" ballerinas of traditional classical ballet in a piece he called "Tiny Bubbles." Brantley's wide-ranging interests also included fine cookery - he worked in

several restaurants - a green thumb he exercised by maintaining plants for area businesses, athletics and in recent years a boat he lovingly restored.

"He did anything," Reid said. "I think ballet got to be his life - and Benny."

Longtime partner Benny Cole says Brantley, who was a dedicated athlete, discovered another side of himself through dance. "He loved ballet and loved playing with the quirkiness of it, bringing that more to the fore than the serious, lovely-dressed ballerinas," she said.

"When Larry hung up his tights as a cavalier, he did character roles such as the Mouse King in 'Nutcracker,'" Cindy Reid said. "He was the best. He was such a great actor." To entertain those he danced with as well as the audience, he worked in silly in-jokes, like imitations of Reid's brother, into the stage business.

The weekend's program also includes Brantley's lyrical "Winter Song," "Tilyou's Revenge" and "Promenade," choreographed in collaboration with dancer Liz VanVleck, who is returning to Ithaca from her home in Geneva, Switzerland, to perform it again.

Perhaps one reason he inspired such friendship and loyalty was his attitude toward students and performers in his ballets. "He was from the shut-up and dance school!" Cindy said. "He didn't want to intellectualize, and he didn't want to work people too hard. That's not typical of choreographers."

Brantley was also an inspirational dance teacher.

"He encouraged so many people who might have been discouraged," Cindy Reid said. "He didn't see that anyone couldn't do it."

"Larry was not somebody who liked to focus attention on himself," Eagleson said. "He loved inspiring young kids to do choreography and to believe in themselves. A lot of teenagers don't have a lot of self-confidence, but they do have a lot of ideas. So he did a lot of mentoring. He would often just pull someone aside, chat with them backstage, to give them a little self-confidence when they most needed it. He relished the fact that he might have affected someone by inspiring them to express themselves through dance."

"He was a role model for other male dancers," Cindy Reid said. "He was a very masculine, regular guy who was a brilliant artist and brilliant choreographer. Actually, he was an incredible role model for everyone."

Cindy Reid tells a story that comes close to explaining why Brantley was so greatly loved well beyond the dance community. Just before Brantley's death, when he was being settled in intensive care, he recognized an intensive care nurse as the mother of an **Ithaca Ballet** alumna. "The first thing he said was, 'How's our girl?' Here he was, close to death, and his first question was about how his former student was doing."

"He was just one of those one-in-a-million people."